

# 1

## ***November 1871 – Swindon, England***

Fergus Deagan stood in the kitchen, staring at the doctor in horror. 'You must be able to do *something!*'

'I'm very sorry, Mr Deagan, but I can't stop the bleeding. We doctors are helpless against the trials of childbirth. At least you still have time to say farewell to your wife.' He pulled out his pocket watch, studied it and moved into the hall. 'I have to visit another patient now, I'm afraid. There is nothing I can do to help you.'

He left the little terraced house and walked briskly down the street, his footsteps echoing back like blows to Fergus's aching head.

The night had been harrowing, as his wife struggled to give birth, and now this. He couldn't move for a moment or two, just stood leaning against the front door frame, staring down the street. Then he realised a neighbour was looking at him from her doorway, so he shook his head to show things weren't going well. Closing the front door quietly, he climbed the stairs, feeling weighed down with sorrow. And guilt.

As he went into the bedroom, the midwife thrust a wriggling bundle into his arms.

'Take comfort from—'

'This gives me no comfort!' Fergus said in a low voice, looking down in loathing at the wailing scrap of humanity. He thrust it back at her without asking whether it was a boy or a girl. What did he care about that, now?

'I need to be alone with my wife.'

When the midwife didn't move, he pushed her out on to the landing. 'I don't want the boys brought up here to say farewell. I want them to remember their mother alive. Anyway, she said goodbye to them when her pains started.'

Just in case, Eileen had told him with a faint smile. It was as if she'd known she'd not survive. As if she was already moving away from them into another world.

He closed the door and flung himself down on the floor beside the bed, clutching her hand. She was so pale and insubstantial, he thought for a moment she hadn't waited to say her final farewell, then he saw the pulse fluttering weakly at her throat.

She opened her eyes and stared at him.

'The doctor's wrong,' he said desperately. 'We'll nurse you carefully, get you better.'

'Too tired. Been tired for so long.' She whispered the words, managing with an effort to raise one hand to caress his thick black hair.

He held her hand tightly, wishing he could share his own strength with her.

When Eileen spoke again, it was even more faintly. 'It is a girl, Fergus. I did so want . . . a daughter.'

Her words came in little bursts, as if she hadn't the energy to finish a complete sentence. 'When it's all over . . . go to your brother. Take the children to Bram. Take my parents too. Nothing for you now, here in England.'

She'd been saying that for the last few weeks as she dragged herself round the house, waiting to give birth, skeletally thin except for the obscene mass of her belly. She'd had to leave the hard physical housework to her mother.

He'd spent those weeks cursing himself. They'd decided a while ago not to have any more children because of Eileen's poor health, and he'd coped without the bed play because he didn't want to kill her. She'd seemed a bit better, too, without the burden of carrying a child.

But she'd longed for a daughter, could think of nothing else, and had begged time and

again for one last child.

Guilt wrapped itself round him like shackles. Why had he agreed? He should have known better.

'Promise me you'll go to your brother, Fergus. Mr Kieran said in his letter all the other Deagans . . . have left Ireland and joined Bram in Australia. He'll send you money for fares. I know he will.'

Still Fergus hesitated. He didn't want to be beholden to anyone, let alone his damned eldest brother.

'Promise me.' A tear rolled down her cheek. 'Please, Fergus. Then I can go in peace.'

He couldn't deny her this final wish, so forced the words out, 'Very well. I promise.'

'And you'll marry again. Soon.'

He was shocked that she'd say this.

'Fergus?'

'I can't think of that yet, if ever.'

'Please. Our children will still need a mother's love, especially the baby.'

'I may marry one day, if I find someone.'

There was silence and he didn't know what else to say to reassure her.

But she had always been stubborn when she wanted something. 'No. Promise me you'll marry . . . within the year.'

How could he promise such a thing?

'Fergus? *Please.*'

He could see death in her face, couldn't deny her anything. 'Very well. I'll marry within the year.'

'Promise.'

'I promise.'

When she spoke, her voice was so faint he had to lean close to hear. 'You'll call our

daughter Niamh. As we agreed.'

'Yes.'

'Don't let them spell it wrongly.'

She'd made such a point of this. Her favourite girl's name was pronounced 'Neev', but spelled very differently. Strange that she'd insist on it now. Shouldn't she be praying?

What did he know of deathbeds?

'Fergus?'

'I'll make sure people know how to spell it.'

With a sigh she closed her eyes. 'That's good. Such a lovely name.'

A few minutes later she whispered, 'So tired, my darling, so . . . very . . . tired.'

Eileen didn't speak again, and a few minutes later she breathed her last. For all he was a strong man, Fergus sobbed over her body, great racking sounds as grief tore into him.

Such a short life and he didn't think he'd made her happy. Not really.

That was how his mother-in-law found him when she heard his sorrow echoing round the house.

He didn't tell her it was as much guilt as grief, just as he'd not told anyone else how quickly his love for Eileen had faded into fondness and then mere habit. Most other marriages seemed to be like that, he'd noticed.

But he'd hoped for more when they met, she was so lively and pretty. He hadn't expected to spend his life with someone who echoed his words and opinions back to him, someone whose thoughts were only of her family and home. Oh, she'd listened quietly enough when he talked of the wider world he read about in newspapers, but she wasn't really interested. He could tell.

Still, for all her faults, Eileen hadn't deserved to die so young.

He shouldn't have given in to her about the child.

After their sad and disturbed night, Fergus's sons were tired. Their grandmother gave them breakfast then took them to sit in the front room of the small terraced house, something they only normally did on Sundays. Their father had stayed with their mother.

'Stay here and be good, boys.' She dropped a kiss on each of their heads.

When she'd gone upstairs, they huddled in their father's armchair, pressed tightly against one another. At ten and six, they knew something bad was happening, because they'd seen their mother fall ill three times already, after losing a baby too frail to survive.

When their grandmother came back later to tell them their mother was dying, they could only stare at her numbly. She was sobbing as she spoke, which made little Mal cling more tightly to his big brother.

As she went out into the kitchen at the back, they heard their father start weeping upstairs and this was so shocking, they began to cry as well, huddling close to one another.

For once, their grandma didn't come to comfort them. She went rushing upstairs, shouting, 'No! No! Not yet.'

They waited but the terrible noise of their father's grief went on and on, echoed by their grandmother's weeping.

'Mam must be dead,' Sean said in a hushed voice.

'What'll we do now?' Mal whispered back, wiping his tears away with his sleeve.

'I don't know,' Sean admitted. Then he remembered what his mother had made him promise before the baby started to be born. 'But I'll always look after you because I'm your big brother.'

'I'll look after you, too.'

'You're too little to do that.'

'Am not.'

'Are so.'

Their grandfather came into the room, tears rolling down his cheeks, and they stopped their half-hearted bickering. He held out his arms and they threw themselves at him, letting him hug them for a long time, needing the solid comfort of his sturdy old body.

Granda went on crying, though, and he didn't stop until the midwife came into the front room, holding the new baby in her arms.

'I need your help, Mr Grady.'

He stood up, fished in his pocket for his handkerchief and blew his nose. 'What can I do, Mrs Sealey?'

'I've some water heating to wash your daughter's body before I lay her out. When I've got everything ready, you must come upstairs with me and get your wife and son-in-law out of the bedroom. Bring them down here to comfort your grandsons.'

He nodded, looking at the bundle in her arms. 'Is the baby a boy or a girl?'

'A girl. Very small, though.'

'Eileen wanted a girl.' He put an arm round each grandson and tried to draw them across the room. 'You have a sister, boys, a baby sister. Come and look at her.'

Sean pulled away. 'No. I hate her! She killed our mam.'

Patrick looked at his older grandson in shock. 'She did not.'

'If it wasn't for the baby, Mam would still be alive. I heard Dad say so.'

'Your mam longed for a daughter. It was *she* who chose to try for another baby. The baby didn't ask to be born.'

'Well, *I* don't want a sister. I want my mam back.'

'Sean lad, you mustn't speak like that. It's the Lord's will that your mother has gone to heaven.'

‘We needed Mam more here than God does up there,’ the boy declared, chin jutting in that stubborn way he had. ‘He’s got plenty of other people with him in heaven.’

Patrick and Mrs Sealey exchanged shocked glances, but nothing they said would change the boys’ minds.

‘Will you hold the baby while I finish getting things ready, Mr Grady?’

‘Yes, of course.’ He held out his arms.

The two boys stepped even further back, scowling across at their new sister.

Patrick looked down at his granddaughter. The baby weighed so little and yet she was staring up at him as if she could really see him, as if she needed him now that she had no mother to care for her. It was as if she was asking for his love. He felt a tug at his heart at the sight of her tiny hands and wispy dark hair, at the way her little head nestled in the crook of his arm.

He knew what his daughter had wanted to call her, so he said the name aloud.

‘Welcome to the family, Niamh.’ He turned to his grandsons. ‘Ah, come and look at her, at least, boys.’

But they continued to scowl and shake their heads, so he thought it best not to push them any more just now and went into the kitchen with the midwife.

He felt desperately sad, but was determined not to give way to tears again. There were things that needed doing and someone in the family had to keep a clear head.

[section break]

When Fergus stopped weeping, he realised his mother-in-law was holding him in her arms and that her cheeks were wet too.

She moved away and used a corner of her apron to wipe her eyes. ‘Did Eileen say anything at the end, Fergus?’

‘Yes. She told me to go to Bram in Australia.’ He saw the terror on her face and gave her a quick hug. ‘And I’m to take you and Pa with me. I’d never do anything that took the

boys away from you two, you know that. You've looked after them as much as Eileen has during the last year or two.'

'Ah, you're a good son to us, Fergus.'

'I wish I really was your son, not just a son-in-law, Ma. My parents weren't loving like you and Pa, no, not at all loving.' Which was one of the reasons he'd left Ireland to work in England. It had been that or punch his drunken father in the face every time they quarrelled.

But he'd followed his father's example in one way, hadn't he? Deagans always had a lot of children, wore their wives out with it. He'd thought he could do better. But it was hard to fight your own wife when she snuggled up to you in bed and begged for another child.

His mother-in-law's voice brought him back to the present.

'Won't it cost a lot of money to buy passages out to Australia?'

'I suppose so.' If he hadn't promised Eileen, he wouldn't even think of going.

'Where will we find the money for that, Fergus?'

'Remember how I wrote to Bram earlier this year to say where I was, how I thought it was about time to get in touch with my family?'

She nodded. He'd read her the letter before sending it. 'And Mr Kieran at the big house answered your letter, saying your brother wasn't living in Ireland now. I remember.'

'Mr Kieran said he'd sent my letter to my brother in Australia. He said Bram had told him to do that if I ever wrote. He said Bram was doing really well there as a trader.'

She frowned. 'I never did understand what a trader does exactly.'

'Buys and sells things, I suppose. But it must be different from being a shopkeeper or they'd call him that instead. He always was a clever devil, our Bram. But Da kept us home to help him in the fields, so we neither of us managed much education.'

'That hasn't stopped you doing well in your work.'

He shrugged. 'I'm good with machinery, but I'm still not good with words. Bram was much better than me with words.'

'You should be glad your brother's doing well.'

'I am. Sort of. But I won't lie to you, Ma. I envy him. And I can't help thinking that maybe if I'd made more money, like he has, I'd have been able to get better help for Eileen. That doctor didn't stay with her, just left her to bleed to death.' He wiped his sleeve across his eyes as more tears escaped his control.

'Don't blame yourself, lad. She was never strong, our Eileen. She was like me, had trouble carrying a child. But *she* never picked up again afterwards because she kept having more babies, and I only quickened twice, her and a boy who died after a few weeks.' Alana sighed. 'I'd have liked more children. We spoiled Eileen a bit, I know.'

'Well, you've got two fine grandsons, at least.'

'Three grandchildren now.'

'Oh, yes. I forgot the baby.' He put his arm round Ma and gave her another hug before going on with the tale, finding it hard to get the words out calmly.

'It seems Bram arranged for Mr Kieran to advance the money for fares to anyone from the family who wanted to go out to join him in Australia. He said it was Bram's dream—you know, to gather what's left of the family there.'

'That's kind of your brother.'

'I suppose so. But I don't like the thought of asking for his help. The thought of being beholden to him, well, it sticks in my gullet, Ma.'

'But he's your brother. He won't grudge it you. Families should stick together. And anyway, you promised Eileen. It was her final wish. You can't break a deathbed promise.' When he didn't speak, she added softly, 'I think it's a good idea, anyway.'

He looked at her in shock. 'You do? You'd be happy to leave your home and come with

me all the way to Australia? I thought you and Pa would be trying to persuade me to stay here.'

'I'd go anywhere with you and the children, so would my Patrick. To hell and back, if we had to. You said ordinary folk can sometimes make a better life out there in the colonies, so maybe it won't be too bad.'

She might not be able to read and write, but she had an excellent memory. He'd noticed that before. 'How can we know for sure it's the best thing to do, though? I have to think of the children.'

'Fergus, darlin', we can't know anything for certain in this life.'

That made them both fall silent for a minute or two.

She pulled herself together first. 'Talking of children, I hope the midwife knows someone who can wet-nurse that baby. And you haven't even asked how she's going.'

'No. I haven't, have I? How is she?'

'She looks healthy but she's tiny. She'll fade away quickly if she's not fed.'

He didn't care about the baby but didn't want to upset her. 'At least Eileen knew she'd got her wish for a daughter.' To his surprise, something inside him eased very slightly at this thought.

'Yes. And you'll be calling the baby Niamh?'

'Yes.' He didn't care what they called the child, if truth be told.

'You'll need another name, too, a saint's name.'

'No, Ma. I don't believe in that religious stuff any more. A loving God wouldn't have taken Eileen away from me and the boys.'

'Oh, Fergus, don't say that. I know you're upset, but you mustn't question God. He must have a reason for taking my daughter.'

He shrugged.

She sighed, waited a moment, blinking her eyes and sniffing back tears, then said,

'But if your brother helps us, you will go to Australia as Eileen wished?'

'I suppose so. But only if Bram will pay for *all* of us. I'm not leaving you two here on your own, not for anything.'

'Thank you, lad.'

'Ah, don't thank me yet. He'll probably say no. It's a lot of money. Anyway, we won't find out for a while. I should think Mr Kieran will have to write to him in Australia and that'll take months. So it'll be a year or more before we have to go.'

'I see. Now, what do you want to do about looking after the baby and the boys?'

He looked at her blankly. 'I hadn't thought that far ahead yet.'

'Well, think about it now. Life goes on, whether we're happy or sad, and children can't look after themselves.'

'I'll still have to earn a living. Can you go on helping us, do you think, Ma? I don't know what we'd have done without you these past two months and more.'

'Of course I'll help. But I think it'd be easier if Patrick and I moved in here permanently. I can look after you all more easily then. It's too hard for a woman my age to manage two houses. And anyway, it'll save on rent money. With two men earning wages, we should be able to put a bit aside nearly every week for going to Australia.'

'That's a good idea.' Ma was far more intelligent than her daughter had been, for all her lack of education, he thought. Smarter than her husband, too.

'Patrick and I could take the front room. You can sell the furniture that's in there, or I can sell it for you. You can save the money for when we get to Australia. I'll sell ours too.' She watched relief settle on him like a cloak and she felt better as well, to have a new purpose in life.

'Thank you, Ma. You're the kindest woman I've ever met. Would you . . . talk to the midwife for me? About finding someone to feed the baby, I mean. Maybe Niamh could stay with you till you move in here. To tell you the truth, I can't face that baby yet.'

Ma gave him another of those troubled looks, but nodded.

Alana sighed. What Fergus had just said made her determined to move in quickly. She wasn't going to let him avoid his own child once the funeral was over.

Bracing herself, she went across to the still figure on the bed and kissed her daughter's brow one final time, then bent her head in prayer.

She moved away, stopping beside him to say, 'I'll not look at Eileen again in this life, son. I want to remember her like this. At peace.'

At that moment the midwife came in. 'Shall I lay her out for you, Mr Deagan? I'll have to charge you two shillings, but—'

Fergus threw an anguished glance at the bed, said, 'Yes!' in a strangled voice and left the room hastily.

His mother-in-law stayed behind to speak to the midwife.

'He's taking it hard,' Mrs Sealey said.

'Aren't we all? Can you find us a wet nurse, do you think?'

'You're in luck. I know just the person. If she'll do it. She's just lost her own baby.'

'The poor thing.'

Cara Payton sat in her bare little room in the lodging house, too deep in despair even to weep. How was she to face life now that her baby had died? Did she even want to try? She'd grown used to the idea that she was expecting, had been comforted by the thought that she'd not be on her own after her child was born.

But the baby had never even breathed, poor little creature. It'd been a girl, too. She'd wanted a girl.

When someone knocked on the door, she couldn't be bothered to get up and answer it. *Go away*, she thought. *Leave me to my grieving.*

The door opened and Mrs Sealey peeped round it. 'Oh, you are there, Cara. I thought you must have gone out. Didn't you hear me knocking?'

She shrugged.

The midwife came bustling across to study her face and click her tongue in disapproval. 'You've not washed or dressed today, girl. You're letting yourself go.'

'Who is there to care what I do?'

'Do it for yourself, that's what I say.' Mrs Sealey went to scoop some water out of the bucket she'd filled herself the previous evening. 'Here. Let's get you freshened up while we talk.'

Cara allowed her to do as she wished, turning to and fro like a child being washed by its mother.

'There. Don't you feel better for being clean?'

'Not really.'

'Well, this will lift your spirits. I need your help, dear. A young woman died earlier this morning, but her baby's still alive and we need a wet nurse for her.'

That caught Cara's attention. She stared in shock at the midwife. 'You're not suggesting that *I* do that?'

'Yes, of course I am. Because if you don't, that baby will die. You're the only woman round here who's at the right stage and has milk to spare.'

'No. I can't do it. Not for a stranger.'

'Yes, you can. I'm not taking no for an answer. You can do what you like with yourself afterwards. If you're cowardly enough, you can even kill yourself. Oh, yes. I'd guessed what you'd been thinking. But that baby deserves a chance to live. I know you're not so selfish you'll let a tiny little girl die when you could save her.'

There was silence in the room. Voices spoke in the distance, but here was only the quiet breathing of the two women. Mrs Sealey waited a moment before reaching out to

touch her companion's arm, repeating what she'd said, speaking more softly this time. 'You can save a life, Cara. Will you turn away and let a baby die?'

'Did you say it's a girl?'

'Yes. They've called her Niamh.'

'I . . . I'm not exactly sure what a wet nurse does.'

'Feeds the baby.' She pointed to Cara's full breasts. 'You've got plenty of milk. She'll suck it out, grow stronger on it. And as well as feeding her, you'll care for all her needs, change her clouts, keep her clean, wash her clothes.'

Another silence, then the thought of a little baby dying if she didn't help settled in Cara's mind and she couldn't refuse. 'I suppose I could try it. If you'll show me how.'

'Good girl. We'll go and see the family now. That baby needs feeding straight away.'

The younger woman's voice rang with panic. 'I don't want to go out or see anyone! Tell them to bring the baby here.'

'You'll be better going to them. You'll have to feed her several times a day, she's so small. Besides, this place is a slum. I've seen the black beetles crawling around, even though you've kept this room clean.'

Cara shuddered.

'Anyway, didn't you tell me you only had enough money to last until two months after the birth?'

'My father didn't believe me about being attacked by that man, because he's a friend and—' Her voice grew scornful, 'A pillar of the church. When Father turned me out, he gave me what he thought was enough money to see me through to the birth and he said—' She gulped and had to stop speaking till she had control of her voice. 'He said I'd be on my own after that. I was soiled and could never be clean, so I wasn't to go near the rest of the family again, or he'd have me locked away in the asylum.'

No use offering her sympathy. That poor girl needed to be pushed into this or she'd

mope. 'Who'd want to go near such a heartless man? But the rest of your family aren't like that. It was your aunt who sent you to me, after all, and she gave you some more money, didn't she?'

'She gave me what she could, but my uncle isn't generous with her. He didn't let her take me in, because he thinks the same way my father does.'

'Well, no use feeling sorry for yourself. Done is done. Let's talk about your new job. These people will pay you a little, and will house and feed you. That'll make your money last longer. Every farthing helps when it comes to money, believe me.'

'So I've found.'

'You'll have to share a bedroom with the other children, I suppose, but there are only two of them and they're well brought up little boys. We can hang a blanket across the room to give you privacy. Or no . . . maybe they can go in with their father? Yes, that'd be better. I'll suggest it to him. The boys will comfort him and he'll comfort them.'

'I'd rather the baby came to me here,' Cara repeated.

Mrs Sealey folded her arms and looked at her sternly. 'You can't afford to be proud. Pull yourself together, girl! I'm offering you help and you're just sitting around like an old wash rag. You can't hide in this room for ever.'

'I don't know why you even bother with me. I'm a fallen woman now, aren't I?'

'No, you're not. I know your aunt and I've come to know you. We both believe your side of the story. But you do have to make a new life for yourself. And you can do it, I know you can.'

Cara swallowed hard, still feeling overwhelmed.

'Come on. Let's get you dressed neatly, then we'll go and meet the family. Deagan, that's their name. There are thousands worse off than you. That baby's mother, for one. She's dead, and only thirty years old. You're still alive.'

And Cara let Mrs Sealey, who had been so kind to her, bully her into clean clothes and

take her outside for the first time since the birth two days previously.

The sun was bright and she blinked, dazzled by it.

'Hurry up, will you? I haven't got all day.'

Cara set off. One foot in front of the other, she thought wearily. That's how you walked. Even when you didn't care about getting there.